

Missing May Study Guide

Missing May by Cynthia Rylant

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Plot Summary

"Missing May" is the story of a twelve-year-old girl, Summer, and her Uncle Ob struggling to come to terms with their grief after Aunt May dies unexpectedly.

At the opening of the novel, Aunt May has just passed away. Ob is having a very difficult time accepting the news and spends his first night alone in his old Chevy pick-up. Meanwhile, twelve-year-old Summer takes on the caretaker role, ensuring that Ob is dealing with his emotions, that the house is clean, and that they both have enough to eat. Summer wasn't always in this role, however. For the first six years of her life, she was passed from family member to family member after her mother died. Summer never felt loved in any of these houses, and never felt valuable. That is, until she finally came to stay with May and Ob, and was overwhelmed with the love they showed her. From that moment on, Summer knew she was home.

After May's death, a neighbor boy, Cletus, begins showing up at the trailer in Deep Water. At first, he comes hoping to steal some old newspapers from Ob's truck, but when he hears that May has died, he begins coming by more frequently to share his stories with Ob. This new relationship makes Summer very uncomfortable as she fears that Cletus is growing too close to Ob, and that he may steal him away from her. She goes out of her way to be rude to Cletus and make him feel unwelcome, but Cletus keeps coming back, and keeps comforting Ob. Then one day, Ob feels May's presence in the garden where she died, and everything changes. He is sure May needs to communicate something with him, and he will stop at nothing to reconnect with her.

One day Cletus shares a news story with Ob about a pastor in nearby Putnam County that has the ability to commune with the dead. Without thinking much about it, Ob is determined to make his way to Putnam County to meet with this Reverend: Miriam B. Youngs, to see if she can communicate May's message to him. Summer is weary about the idea, but after Ob suffers an emotional breakdown and admits that he doesn't want to go on living anymore, she is grateful that he finally has something to get him out of bed in the morning, something to focus his energy on, so she agrees.

When the group arrives in Putnam County, however, they receive the terrible news that the Reverend has passed on. Ob is crushed. There is no one to translate May's message to him and he feels crushingly lonely. He puts Summer and Cletus back in the car to drive home, and almost passes up the day trip to Charleston he promised them. At the last moment, Ob turns the car around and drives back to Charleston. In this moment, it becomes clear that Ob is going to tackle his loneliness and go on living for his love of Summer and his friendship with Cletus. At the end of the novel, Ob, Cletus, and Summer set up all Ob's whirligigs in May's garden and set them, and their emotions, free.



Part One: Still as Night - Chapter One

Part One: Still as Night - Chapter One Summary

The first chapter of the book opens with the news that May has just died and her husband, Ob, is having a difficult time accepting it. In fact, on the night May died, Ob spent the night in his old Chevy pick-up, leaving twelve-year-old Summer to worry about him.

Summer had arrived at her Aunt May and Uncle Om's house six years earlier, after being passed around from relative to relative after her mother died. As soon as she arrived, she understood what love was like, from the way May and Ob treated each other and treated her. She remembers being welcomed into May and Ob's trailer with open arms, and shelves full of junk food. She also remembers being overwhelmed by the beauty of the whirligigs - pinwheels - that Ob worked on. They were all over the house and garden. With the beautiful whirligigs and a finally full stomach, Summer knew she had arrived home.

Part One: Still as Night - Chapter One Analysis

The novel opens with the news that Summer's life has changed, yet again. It is clear from the opening that this story will not so much be about Summer's emotional journey after May's death, but Ob's. It is clear that Summer has a strong emotional constitution, but Ob is very fragile, as displayed by his behavior on the day of the funeral. All her life, Summer wondered why Ob didn't get rid of that broken down pick-up, but on the day of the funeral, she realized what he had kept it for. It was as if he knew someday he'd need a quiet place to sit and be alone. Summer's understanding of Ob's mental state shows how close she is to her aunt and uncle, confirming for the reader that the three were very much in love with each other.

Summer remembers a few moments of love with her real mother, memories of her mother rubbing lotion on her arms and holding her close, as if desperate to give Summer a memory of love so she would know when it returned back into her life. When Summer came to live with Ob and May, she felt overwhelmed with love, and compares her experiences with the couple to Alice after she's fallen into Wonderland.



Part One: Still as Night - Chapter Two

Part One: Still as Night - Chapter Two Summary

May had been gardening when she died. She called it gardening even though most other people in Fayette County simply said they were going out to work in their gardens. Although the term "gardening" usually conjures up an image of a woman in a flowered hat pruning roses, May never actually owned a flowered hat, and never had roses - her garden was full of pole beans, cabbage, and practicality. The fact that May died in her precious garden is the only thing about the situation that makes sense to Summer.

One day while Summer is helping Ob in the garden, Ob straightened up like a dog that's just heard a small animal scurrying by, ears pricked. He shouts, "Hotdamn!" and has a look on his face as if he's just had a major revelation. Summer is concerned, and her concern grows when Ob insists that May had just stopped in to pay them a visit. That her soul was still here. Summer is disturbed by this idea, but remembers that May herself believed in spirits, especially the idea that the spirits of her dead parents - who died when May was nine in a flash flood - were always watching over her. All her life, May would get feelings that her parents were with her, and that always comforted her, but something about this leaves Summer unsettled. Summer seems to know that Ob is going to die too if he doesn't find some way of mending his broken heart, and Summer knows that if Ob dies, she's on her own once again.

Part One: Still as Night - Chapter Two Analysis

By Chapter Two, it's been nearly six months since May's death, and Summer reckons she and Ob haven't accomplished anything but sit around and miss her. It's February now, and Summer knows the dark and cold aren't helping her situation, particularly when it's time to walk to school. That's when she feels most alone. She claims she has never felt afraid of anything since moving to the mountain, but now that May is gone, she feels alone, even adrift.

When Ob insists that May is still with them, Summer asks somewhat stupidly, "What did she feel like?" (Page13). Ob says that May felt like she felt when she was packing up for Ohio, where her family lived. Every time May packed up to visit her family, half of her wanted to stay behind at the trailer, and half desperately wanted to be with her family. She never could make up her mind. While Ob sees May's indecisiveness as a warm sign - he loves the idea of keeping her near - Summer is disturbed, claiming that if May was going to go through the trouble of dying on them, the least she could was to make up her mind about where she was going next.



Part One: Still as Night - Chapter Three

Part One: Still as Night - Chapter Three Summary

Summer is worried that hearing about May's ghost will only encourage Cletus, the neighbor boy, whose been coming over frequently, annoying her. Ob first spotted Cletus trying to break into his old Chevy last fall, and Summer warned Ob he'd better stay away from the boy. Instead, Ob went out to confront him and before Summer knew it, Cletus was inside their house sipping hot cocoa. Summer has always thought Cletus was odd because of his collections. First, Cletus was collecting old potato chip bags, then buttons, then wrapping paper, and finally pictures cut out of newspapers and magazines.

Once inside the house, Cletus shared stories with Ob for seven straight hours. He carries around a suitcase full of clippings and makes up stories about the people in them. Ob finds the stories very amusing, and it's clear that he enjoys Cletus' company, because it takes his mind off of May's death. The only time Summer was ever pleased to have Cletus on the property was on Christmas Day, when he arrived with a 1,000 piece jigsaw puzzle. He and Ob sat for the entire day working on that puzzle in silence, and Ob didn't have to think about missing May once that day.

Part One: Still as Night - Chapter Three Analysis

In this chapter, a new character is introduced in Cletus. Summer narrates Cletus' bizarre collections in great detail, claiming that he is strange, but she doesn't seem to fully understand why she is so threatened by his presence on her property. It may be clear to the reader that Summer is terrified of Ob and Cletus bonding, because Ob is all she has left. She is jealous of the fact that Cletus understands Ob's grief on a level that she doesn't, and she clearly feels possessive of Ob's time and affection. Ob, however, seems to need a project to focus his mind on, and befriending lonely Cletus is a perfect project for him. When Cletus arrives, he arrives with a suitcase full of stories. All Ob has to do is listen.



Part One: Still as Night - Chapter Four

Part One: Still as Night - Chapter Four Summary

On the school bus, Cletus shows Summer his new favorite photo, an antique photo of a baby in a christening gown so long it nearly covers the chair the baby is sitting on, giving the impression that the baby is simply hovering in the air. Cletus likes the photo because he thinks it's "surreal". He got the photo from another old neighbor, Mrs. Davis. Summer is annoyed that Cletus is bothering other neighbors as well, but Cletus feels bad for Mrs. Davis who never gets visitors.

Cletus arrives to the house after dinner, and Ob wastes no time asking him whether or not he believes in the afterlife. Cletus absolutely does. When Cletus was seven-years-old and his grandfather had just passed away, everyone was ignoring him on the day of the funeral so he went down to the river to skip some stones. Suddenly, he slipped into the river and began to drown. He swears that he passed on. Everything turned a brilliant white, and suddenly he was hugging his grandfather and his dog, Cicero, that had passed on years before. Then he heard someone telling him to come on back home. His grandfather and Cicero began to fade away, everything turned grey, and then he was back on the riverbank, freezing and wet, with his uncle threatening to beat him to death if he ever scared the family like that again.

Part One: Still as Night - Chapter Four Analysis

Chapter Four opens with the eerie image of the baby seeming to hover in the air, adding another dimension to the theme of ghosts and the afterlife. The symbolism of the baby in the chair is that it's simply an illusion, but it's clear, there's a veil between the two worlds - this world and the next - but they are seemingly intertwined. This idea is further expanded with Ob's relationship with May, which seems to span both worlds, and Cletus' relationship with the other world: He is the only one who has been lucky enough to pass over and come back again.

When Ob hears the story of Cletus passing over and coming back again, he is sure the reason he met Cletus is so that Cletus can translate for May. Maybe Cletus is closer to the other side since he's been there once before. Cletus agrees to do his best even though he's no psychic. Summer is outraged at the idea that Cletus might have another reason to stick around, but when she sees how painfully tired Ob looks, and the tiny spark of hope in his eyes, she says nothing.



Part One: Still as Night - Chapter Five

Part One: Still as Night - Chapter Five Summary

Ob is desperate to reconnect with May, so he drags Summer and Cletus out to May's garden in the hopes that her spirit will return to communicate with them, with Cletus there to interpret what she's saying. Summer has high hopes - May never failed them while she was living - but May's spirit doesn't present itself. While he waits, Ob tells Cletus stories about what a good wife and mother May was. He doesn't tell the stories Summer expects him to tell, like how May saved money for three years to buy Ob the model plane he coveted from Sears, or how she stayed awake for 32-hours straight when Summer was sick with chicken pox. Instead, Ob tells stories about how May rubbed his knees down with Ben-Gay every night to stop them from aching, and how she called "Summer honey, you are the best little girl I ever did know" out the window when Summer was playing.

Reimagining all these memories of May fills Summer with sadness, and she thinks about May's funeral. She remembers all the family members coming around, hugging her, and sharing food. She knows the funeral should have given Ob a sense of peace, that May's life was over, but Ob is anything but peaceful. After Ob finishes telling his stories, he turns his head from side to side, as if listening, and then sighs, knowing May won't be coming for them. When he is gone, Cletus accuses Summer of not believing that Ob still feels a connection to May. He goes on to say that Ob has visions just like Summer, except that Summer's always trying to fight them off.

Part One: Still as Night - Chapter Five Analysis

Summer considers how Ob is grieving for May. She feels somewhat uncomfortable with his unique grieving style, and she thinks that just as there are certain ways people expect you to get married or go to church or raise kids, "there are certain ways people expect you to grieve" (Page 36). After Ob realizes May isn't coming back for him in the garden, he grows extremely depressed and heads back to the house, not speaking to anyone. When he's gone, Cletus accuses Summer of not believing that Ob and May still have a connection. Summer says it doesn't matter whether she believes him or not, she's just worried that his broken heart is going to make him sick, or worse. Cletus claims that since Summer is a storyteller, a writer, she should have a deeper understanding of what Ob is going through, but she doesn't.

Cletus compares Ob's connection with May to his connection with his art. Ob doesn't make whirligigs of things other people necessarily understand, he's an abstract thinker, and that's what both May and Summer love about him. When Cletus leaves, Summer is frustrated that he seems to understand Ob better than she does, and she feels very alone, lost forever in Deep Water.



Part Two: Set Free - Chapter Six

Part Two: Set Free - Chapter Six Summary

After the day in the garden, Summer feels as if she and Ob are on separate life paths. After the day after the garden, Ob doesn't get out of bed, and Summer knows something is terribly wrong. She runs to his room and asks if everything's alright. He calls out her name, weakly. He is shaking, and looks gray in the light: "I must have overslept," he whispered. And he knew, as well as I, that he had never, not any day of his life, overslept" (Page 45). Summer knows that Ob is humiliated, and graciously offers to leave him in bed while she makes him some coffee.

While Summer is preparing coffee, she realizes that Ob didn't oversleep simply because he was tired, but because he was really ready for everything, his life, to be over. He doesn't want to try anymore. This is confirmed for her when Ob shuffles downstairs, still in his pajamas, sending chills through Summer's bones. After breakfast, Ob begins to weep and says, "Summer, I don't think I can do it" (Page 48).

Part Two: Set Free - Chapter Six Analysis

Summer compares her situation after the day in the garden to "The Wizard of Oz" saying that it is like if Dorothy, the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion were all on separate paths to meet the Wizard - all hoping there really is a Wizard, and all thinking they know the best way to the Emerald City - except that their wizard is peace of mind and a restful soul.

While Summer is preparing coffee for Ob, she remembers a time when she was in elementary school and the students were all asked to write a description of a fellow classmate while the others tried to guess who was being described. One of the girls being described sounded like a sad welfare case with sad clothes and dirty hair. Suddenly, Summer realized they were describing her, and a wave of humiliation spread over her. She imagines that this is what Ob must be feeling now, and that he probably wants to be left alone. When he comes downstairs and tells Summer that he can't carry on with his life any longer, Summer feels strangely exhilarated, knowing that at least he is rooted enough in reality to still be thinking things through. She is confident that there is hope for Ob yet.



Part Two: Set Free - Chapter Seven

Part Two: Set Free - Chapter Seven Summary

When Cletus arrives, he and Ob immediately begin discussing a new church Cletus found, a spiritualist church where the pastor can allegedly commune with the dead. Summer knows there is no way Ob will ever step foot in a church, so she is completely dumbfounded when he suggests they take a road trip to pay this pastor a visit. Despite Summer's objections, Ob convinces her and Cletus to join him on a road trip to Putnam County to visit The Reverent Miriam B. Young: Small Medium at Large during their school break. He even suggests that they stop in at Charleston, the state capital, on the way back down, to give the kids a history lesson in addition to a religious one. Cletus especially is excited by the thought of visiting Charleston because he desperately wants to be a "renaissance man" when he grows up, and knows he must be well-cultured to do so. Ob shoots back that Cletus will soon be a "Rent-a-Séance Man", which garners a huge laugh from Cletus.

Part Two: Set Free - Chapter Seven Analysis

Summer is outraged at the thought of entertaining Ob's beliefs that a medium in Putnam County might be able to commune with Aunt May, but when she sees the glint in Ob's eyes when he talks about it, she realizes this has given him a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Even though she doesn't agree with what they're doing, she decides to go along with it because, deep down, she is terrified of losing Ob too. At the end of the chapter, she admits that she's lost many things already and she's afraid of what she might lose in Putnam County, but where is the risk of losing Ob greater here or in Putnam? Deep down, though, Summer knows that all the chips lay in May's pile. It's her decision whether or not she wants to join them in Putnam, and that frightens Summer too.

In this chapter, it becomes clear that Summer's relationship with Cletus is beginning to change. Previously, she couldn't stand having him around, knowing he understood Ob better than she did. The reader might suspect that Summer would be jealous of Cletus' willingness to travel to Putnam County with Ob, particularly when Summer herself is against it, but Summer is beginning to see how Cletus motivates Ob, even cheers him up. She also respects the fact that Cletus didn't ask her why she wasn't in school that day, and was only concerned with making sure she and Ob were alright. Although Summer doesn't necessarily appreciate Cletus yet, she is beginning to realize that selfishness gets you nowhere, and her relationship with Cletus reflects that.



Part Two: Set Free - Chapter Eight

Part Two: Set Free - Chapter Eight Summary

When May was alive, she always liked bats. Sometimes a bat would fly into the trailer and Summer remembers waking up, hearing the flapping of wings above her head. While lying there, she recognized that many people were deathly afraid of bats, which led her to question fear in general - where does it really come from? When May located the bats, she would always feel bad for them, speaking to them in a slow pitiful way, "Poor little feller" (Page 58). Then she and Ob would take turns trying to throw a blanket over the bat's head and carry him outside to set him free. Once, May accidentally injured a bat while trying to save it, so she kept it in a shoebox filled with warm towels to try to nurse it back to health. Unfortunately, the bat died, and Summer thought its little body was so small and lovely that she was overcome with grief. Eventually, Ob discovered that the bats were flying in through the heating ducts and he had them sealed off.

After his decision to drive to Putnam County with the kids, Ob gets out of bed on time every morning for the next week. On Saturday morning, he and Summer drive to Cletus' house to ask his parents' permission to take him on the trip during school break. Cletus' house is set far back from the road in a clump of pine trees. When Cletus answers the door, he almost doesn't look like himself. Summer realizes that he looks calm, secure in the knowledge that he is loved by his parents. Unexpectedly, Summer feels glad to see him. Cletus' parents are quite old, and when Summer shakes Mrs. Underwood's hand, she is seized with the fear that Mrs. Underwood might die soon.

When Ob explains the purpose of the trip to Putnam County, the Underwoods sit quietly, nodding, listening. Ob explains that since May died, Summer's been having a difficult time adjusting: "Poor little thing. She just can't figure what to do with herself when she's got some time on her hands" (Page 62). Summer is shocked. She has never heard Ob lie before. After that explanation, Mrs. Underwood quickly agrees to send Cletus along on the trip, shooting a sympathetic look toward Summer, whose mouth hangs open in disbelief.

Part Two: Set Free - Chapter Eight Analysis

Upon meeting his parents, Summer realizes that she hasn't met them before not because Cletus was embarrassed of them, but because he was embarrassed of her, her indifference toward Cletus, and she is ashamed. Immediately, her attitude toward Cletus changes and she makes a promise to herself to be kinder to him, to treat him more like a friend. Her shame is amplified with, during his lie, Ob tells the Underwoods that Cletus has been able to get through to Summer, which is why they need him to come along with them to Putnam County. He says that Cletus and Summer are practically best friends, and that they're so grateful for the ways he's helped Summer.



Later, when Mrs. Underwood is pitying Summer for her inability to cope with May's death, she says, "It's so hard when the Lord takes a loved one away from us," (Page 64), and for the first time, Summer is seized with a tight throat and cannot answer back. In that moment, the reader is left wondering if Ob was telling the truth about Summer, maybe she hasn't fully dealt with May's death even though she puts on a very tough exterior.

Summer is faced with two of her main character issues in this chapter, the first is fear. When she hears that the preacher in Putnam County keeps bats, she recalls her childhood memories of the bats that used to fly into the trailer. These memories leave her questioning fear in general, "I had no reason to fear bats, and as I grew and discovered how many people are deathly afraid of them, it made me wonder about fear. Whether it all just starts with the people who raised us" (Page 58). This thought eventually leads to Summer questioning her fear of death, both with the bat that eventually died and later with the Underwoods, who seem too old to be raising a child Cletus' age. When she sees them, she fears their deterioration and runs through a list of chiropractors and optometrists in her mind that may be able to stave off the Underwoods' impending deaths. She simply cannot comprehend how Cletus can be so serene, even peaceful, in his life when his parents could die at any moment. Then she realizes that Cletus is so peaceful because he knows he is truly loved, and he is secure in that.



Part Two: Set Free - Chapter Nine

Part Two: Set Free - Chapter Nine Summary

On the day they depart for Putnam County, Ob is in an extremely cheerful mood as he packs up the car. When they set off, Cletus immediately begins talking about the new magazines he got from a neighbor who just emptied out the reading material in his outhouse. And with that, the trip commences. Cletus and Ob chatter to each other for the first few minutes, but as they pull away from Deep Water, a silence falls over the car.

That silence isn't broken until they start to see signs for the capital, Charleston. Then Cletus begins to talk nervously about how he's never seen the capital and can't wait to see it in person, not photographs. He's seen only one photograph of the capital - a black and white photo in a history book - and he's nearly overwhelmed at the thought of seeing in person. Hearing him speak like this, Summer is sure that Cletus is going to grow up and be something someday, that he's going to reach his dream of working in the capital, and she finds comfort in that. When they actually see the capital, Cletus has to gulp down his emotions. Even Summer recognizes that the capital buildings are beautiful. Although Cletus is desperate to stop now, Ob promises that they'll be able to stop for a full day on the way back. Right now, the pressing matter is meeting up with May.

Part Two: Set Free - Chapter Nine Analysis

When the car pulls away from the trailer, Summer fears that she'll have to listen to Cletus and Ob blabbering to each other for the full three-hour drive, but as soon as they hit the road, "There was a feeling in that car, and it was almost sadness, but it wasn't. It was sweeter than sadness" (Page 68). It is almost as if Ob and Cletus register the emotional gravity of what they are preparing to do, and a sense of reverence, the same as in a funeral or a church, settles over the passengers. It is almost like sadness, but it is sweeter because it's laced with hope. When Summer looks back in the rearview mirror, she likens Cletus' face as he stares out the window to a small child looking up to heaven and seeing angels. Summer's own quietness comes from a sense of peace - there's nothing for her to do in the car, nothing for her fuss over. She knows that Ob is safe next to her, and Cletus is content in the backseat. It is the first time in a long time that she hasn't been overcome with worry. They are going somewhere; they have a plan.



Part Two: Set Free - Chapter Ten

Part Two: Set Free - Chapter Ten Summary

As soon as they arrive at The Reverent Miriam Young's house, they are informed that the preacher has passed on. All three travelers are completely shocked, stunned and desperate. The three stand there, dumbfounded, unable to turn away from the house. They hadn't planned for this. They have no backup to Miriam not being there. The man delivering the news, the Reverend's nephew, tells them that he's set her bats free, too. Ob makes a desperate attempt for the man to help him contact May, but the man stiffens and says he doesn't have any spiritual powers and that he's very sorry. It's clear then that he would like the family to leave.

Back in the car, Cletus tries to say that he knows of another man in Sissonville that may be able to help, but Ob silences him saying that he's not going to go traipsing across the state like some fool searching for psychics. Miriam's nephew invites the travelers in for a cup of coffee, but again, Ob refuses. He says that they should head back home now. As they drive, no one says a word about stopping at the capital, even though Cletus is nearly crawling out of his skin. Just as the capital is nearly out of sight, Ob sighs and turns it back around. He says he figures the Governor will be at the coffee shop, and he wouldn't want to disappoint him.

Part Two: Set Free - Chapter Ten Analysis

Summer's fears that meeting up with May in Putnam County would fail are realized when they hear the news that the Reverend has passed on, in some cruel irony. When she hears this, Summer thinks, "We were trying to outwit Death on this trip, rise above it, penetrate the blockades it put up between us and May. We were coming to Putnam County to put Death in its place, and instead it had put us squarely back in ours" (Page 73), meaning that one cannot conquer over death, no matter how badly they want to. Clearly what happened to Cletus down at the river was fluke. Life has no power over death, and the Reverend Miriam B. Young has just proved that.

Despite his sorrow over losing May again, Ob still comes through for the kids and brings them to the capital, as they had planned. In this decision, it is clear that Ob is not going to let May's death steal him, too. He is present, even hopeful, as he turns the car around. In this moment, he makes a decision to live, rather than let sadness claim him.



Part Two: Set Free - Chapters Eleven & Twelve

Part Two: Set Free - Chapters Eleven & Twelve Summary and Analysis

Now that May's gone, Summer realizes that she's out of pain. She's the lucky one - May only had to say goodbye to Ob one time and then she became an angel. Ob, on the other hand, has to say goodbye to May every day for the rest of his life, but it will get easier. In Charleston, the three easily find a place to park at the coffee shop, which leads them to feel welcome, even expected. It is as if May is there orchestrating their day, ensuring they feel warm, happy, and loved. Cletus feels the need to touch everything in the capital building, walk down the walls and run his fingers along the wallpaper. He picks up every brochure and smiles at each person he passes. Cletus needs the physical to commemorate a day, he needs a photograph or a piece of paper to remember what he's seen and what he's learned. In that way, he's different from Ob who walks quietly, taking everything in with his eyes and storing it in his heart.

In the capital coffee shop, the three keep their eyes peeled for the Governor, but they don't see him. Instead, they eavesdrop on various conversations taking place around them and felt a part of the experience. Summer sees the longing in Cletus' eyes as he watched these powerful people going about their days, and she says a prayer for him, that he gets the life he hopes for some day. She doesn't say a prayer for herself, however, because she feels too afraid to hope for things anymore.

Back home, Ob asks Cletus to spend the night on the couch so his parents don't grow suspicious of why they are back so early. As they climb out of the car, Summer hears the soft wings of something flying above her. She gasps, and thinks of May. Suddenly, she is overcome with emotion as she remembers May. She begins crying and cannot stop, so Ob has to pick her up and carry her out of the car into the house. Summer cries until her stomach is in knots and her throat burns. Ob doesn't try to comfort her, he just wipes her tears away with his strong hands until Summer grows quiet. Then he says, "She's still here, honey. People don't ever leave us for good" (Page 84). In this moment, it becomes clear that Ob had been telling the truth at the Underwoods' house, Summer hadn't coped with May's death, it was waiting to burst out of her. It is also clear in this moment that Ob is reaching some closure in his life, and that he will continue on caring for Summer, loving her the way she hoped he would.

In the morning, Summer wakes to smell fresh coffee brewing. After breakfast, she, Cletus, and Ob carry all Ob's whirligigs out to May's garden and set them up. When they are all firmly planted in the ground, a strong wind comes, blowing them all beautifully. Summer looks at Ob and the two smile, setting everything free.



Characters

Summer

Summer is the narrator of the novel and the main character in the story. Summer is a twelve-year-old girl coming to terms with the death of her Aunt May, the only mother she's ever really known. When Summer was a baby, her mother died and she was sent from family member to family member looking for a permanent place to live. While she was moving around, Summer never felt loved and she was always hungry. When she was six, however, she met her Uncle Ob and Aunt May, and they took her home, really home, to live.

Upon arriving at Ob and May's Summer felt overwhelmed with love, which prompted her to remember what few memories she had of her birth mother showing her affection: "I know I must have been loved like that, even if I can't remember it. I must have; otherwise how could I even recognize love when I saw it that night between Ob and May?" (Page 4). When May dies unexpectedly in her garden, Summer is forced to deal with the grief of this loss as well as her fears of being on her own again. This fear is compounded by Ob's gradual slip into depression, which leaves Summer fearing that Ob is going to give up on life altogether, and she'll have to take care of herself.

Summer is generally very suspicious, and takes these suspicions out on Cletus, the neighbor boy that arrives in time to emotionally support Ob through his grief. Summer dislikes Cletus and fears that he is going to steal Ob away from her. In time, however, she sees that Cletus offers a peace to Ob that she can't, and she begins to appreciate Cletus' ability to connect with Ob. Summer is also weary of Ob's idea to drive to Putnam County to meet with a spiritual medium that might help them converse with May's ghost. Although Summer thinks driving to Putnam County is a terrible idea, she agrees to go, because it gives Ob hope, and hope gets him out of bed in the morning. By the end of the novel, all three characters have learned how to deal with their grief and overcome their fears of loneliness and death.

Cletus

Cletus is the neighbor boy who begins to visit Ob a few weeks after May's death. Although Cletus is clearly a good influence on Ob, Summer is fiercely jealous of the time he spends with Ob. Cletus has a strange habit of collecting various items - first it was empty potato chip bags, then buttons, then wrapping paper, and finally old photographs, sometimes cut out of newspapers and magazines. Cletus carries the photographs around in an old vinyl suitcase and likes to sit around and make up stories about the people in them. These idiosyncrasies are what drives Summer away from him, but also drive Ob closer to him. Cletus is described as a somewhat awkward boy with bad skin and long greasy hair. He has elderly parents, but is clearly loved by them and feels secure in his home, something Summer is jealous of.



When Cletus was seven-years-old and his grandfather had just passed away, everyone was ignoring him on the day of the funeral so he went down to the river to skip some stones. Suddenly, he slipped into the river and began to drown. He swears that he passed on. Everything turned a brilliant white and he was hugging his grandfather and his dog, Cicero that had passed on years before. Then he heard someone telling him to come on back home. His grandfather and Cicero began to fade away, everything turned grey, and then he was back on the riverbank, freezing and wet, with his uncle threatening to beat him to death if he ever scared the family like that again. By the end of the novel, Cletus has helped Ob come to terms with the loss of his wife, and has won Summer over as a friend, ensuring that none of them will ever feel lonely again.

May

May is Summer's adoptive mother and Ob's wife. May became Summer's mother when she was six-years old, and has never treated Summer like an outsider. When Summer was seven, she passed away, the event that prompted all the action of the novel. Although she is dead, May is still very active in the novel as her spirit supposedly comes to visit with Ob. It is in the hopes of communing with May that Ob and the children make their way to Putnam County.

Ob

Ob is Summer's adoptive father and May's husband. At the opening of the novel, Ob is struggling to deal with his grief over losing his wife, May. He gradually slips deeper and deeper into depression and even considers ending his own life. The only thing that saves Ob is his belief that May's spirit still visits him periodically, and concocts an idea to drive to Putnam County to meet with a medium that may be able to converse with May. By the end of the novel, however, Ob is no closer to conversing with May than he was in the beginning, and he learns how to deal with his dark emotions and embrace the love that's still around him.

Mrs. Henley

Mrs. Henley is Summer and Cletus' school teacher. She cannot come to terms with the idea of growing old, and is the only person in Deep Water to ever have had a face lift.

Mrs. Davis

Mrs. Davis is Cletus' neighbor whom he used to visit and look at old photographs with. Mrs. Davis is the neighbor that gave Cletus the photograph of the baby with the long christening gown that looked as if it was floating in space.



The Reverend Miriam B. Young

The Reverend Miriam B. Young is the medium Ob hopes to visit in Putnam County. She can supposedly converse with the dead, but when Ob and the children arrive at her spiritualist church, the reverend herself has passed on and can offer the family no help.

Mrs. Underwood

Mrs. Underwood is Cletus' mother. She is described as looking like she is made of dried-out apples. She is small and tight and dry, just like her house, but somehow that makes her attractive.

Mr. Underwood

Mr. Underwood is Cletus' father. He is quite old, and resembles a stooped-over elf with a long gray beard.



Objects/Places

The Trailer

The trailer is the first home Summer has ever really known. Although it's beat up - aluminum is peeling off, it's missing a window, and its steps are sinking, Summer loves it. It is set precariously on the face of a mountain, and Summer compares it to a toy God was playing with in heaven before accidentally dropping it down to Earth below.

The Valiant

The Valiant is Ob's only car that actually runs. This is the car Ob drove when he brought Summer home for the first time, and the car that he drove, with Summer and Cletus, to Putnam County for the séance.

The Chevy

The Chevy is a beat up old pick-up truck that Ob held onto years after it first broke down. All her life, Summer wondered why he had kept the broken down truck, but on the day of May's funeral, she realized why. Ob spent the night in the pickup, and Summer realized he saved it for a time in his life when he would need to sit somewhere quiet and truly feel alone.

The Whirligigs

The Whirligigs are the pinwheels Ob crafts and hangs around his house and garden. Unlike other whirligig makers, Ob doesn't create pinwheels that look like everyday objects, but abstract themes like a thunderstorm, heaven, fire, love, dreams, and death.

The Garden

The Garden was May's favorite place in the world. She always said she was going out gardening, even though the rest of Fayette County simply said they were going to work in their gardens. Although May romanticized the place, her actual garden was very practical, full of vegetables and no flowers. The garden is where May died - the only part of the death that made any sense to Summer - and it is also where Ob first felt May's presence after her death.



Cicero

Cicero is Cletus' dog that died a few years before Cletus himself passed into the afterlife. He was thrilled to see his dog, and sorry to say goodbye to him again when he returned to life after his short stay in death.

A Renaissance Man

A Renaissance Man is well-rounded man that can paint, play music, and write poems. Renaissance men are able to discuss all topics, including science and philosophy. Cletus claims to be training to be a Renaissance man, which is why he is looking forward to visiting Charleston, the capital.

The Vinyl Suitcase

The Vinyl Suitcase is a huge blue case that Cletus carries all his newspaper clippings and photographs in. Whenever Summer sees the suitcase - which Cletus carries with him at all times - she knows that she and Ob are going to have to sift through photographs with him and listen to his various made up stories.

Charleston

Charleston is the capital of West Virginia, and is the coveted place Cletus was desperate to visit. After hearing that the Reverend Miriam B. Youngs was dead, Ob wanted to skip their trip to the capital, but at the last moment, turned his car around. The group ate lunch at the capital coffee house, and Summer suspected that Cletus would grow up to work in the capital building one day.

Putnam County

Putnam County is a small town three hours from Deep Water where Summer and Ob live. Ob decides to pack up his car and drive out to Putnam County in the hopes of meeting Reverend Miriam B. Youngs so she can commune with May's spirit for him.



Themes

The Surreal

The first theme in the novel is the surreal nature of the afterlife. The reader first recognizes the surreal nature during May's first visit. During this visit, Ob's ears perk up like a dog's and he sniffs the air, positive May is with them. For all Ob's confidence, Summer isn't so sure. This tension between belief and disbelief is at the center of the surreal nature of the afterlife. Chapter Four opens with the eerie image of the baby seeming to hover in the air, adding another dimension to the theme of ghosts and the afterlife. The symbolism of the baby in the chair is that it's simply an illusion, but it's clear, there's a veil between the two worlds - this world and the next - but they are seemingly intertwined. This idea is further expanded with Ob's relationship with May, which seems to span both worlds. Even so, Ob will go to any lengths to pass the veil separating him from his wife, even going so far as to track down a medium to translate his conversations with her. This act makes perfect sense to those who believe in the surreal. This theme is further amplified by Cletus' relationship with the afterlife. After "dying" as a youngster, Cletus is the only one who has been lucky enough to pass over and come back again. There could be many explanations to what Cletus experienced, just as there could be many explanations as to what Ob experienced in the garden, but these characters chose to put their faith in the surreal.

Belonging

The second theme in the novel is that of belonging. All three of the main characters, Summer, Cletus, and Ob, are outsiders. Summer has been passed around from family member to family member her whole life, until she came to stay with May and Ob. Even though she's found a sense of belonging, her life isn't like other girls her age, and for this, Summer doesn't have many friends. Similarly, Cletus has a strange penchant toward collecting bizarre objects such as potato chip bags, buttons, wrapping paper, and photos cut out of newspapers and magazines. Like Summer, he is raised by much older parents and doesn't have many friends. Ob is an old man with strange ideas about art and his dead wife. When May passed, Ob didn't have much of a support network outside of Summer and Cletus. In a sense, all three were outsiders, and all three were crippled by fear and loneliness. When May died, she essentially brought the three of them together, giving them a project to focus their energy on: ensuring that she pass over. As expected when three outsiders get together, there was some resistance - from Summer - and some great rewards - when the three visited the capital together. By the end of the novel, the three of them were no longer alone, but had each other. Like Summer said in the opening of the novel, she had found her home, again, and a new family to share her love with.



Fear

The third theme of the novel is that of fear. All of the characters in "Missing May" are crippled by some unseen fear - for Summer, the fear is of losing Ob, for Ob, the fear is of being alone, and for Cletus, the fear is of always being lonely. In a way, all three characters fear the same thing, losing the ones they care about, which is the central theme to "Missing May", as all characters are simultaneously dealing with the loss of May, and their own fears of death and loneliness. The fear of death isn't directly discussed in the novel, but it is ever present, from Summer's uncomfortable response to Cletus' eerie photo of the floating baby, to her irrational fear of bats: "I had no reason to fear bats, and as I grew and discovered how many people are deathly afraid of them, it made me wonder about fear. Whether it all just starts with the people who raised us" (Page 58). Cletus seems to have no fear of death itself, having lived through the experience of "passing over" once before, but he clearly fears being alone, without any friends. Ob is the character that struggles with his fears the most, as he is so terrified of a life without May that he drives across the state seeking out a spiritual medium to converse with his late wife's ghost. In the end, however, Ob comes to terms with the fact that he isn't alone - he has Cletus and Summer - and Summer herself realizes that it's not death itself that people fear, but saying goodbye to the ones they love: "But what is it that makes a person want to stay here on this earth anyway, and go on suffering the most awful pain just for the sake of getting to stay? I used to think it was because people fear death. But now I think it is because people can't bear saying goodbye" (Page 79).

Style

Point of View

"Missing May" is told in first person limited omniscience narration, through Summer's perspective, meaning that the story is filtered through Summer's thoughts and dialogue, and the reader is only directly privy to Summer's thoughts and emotions. This point-of-view is very important to the novel as the reader gains insight into Summer's fears and desires, which are important for the reader to understand Summer's character development and emotional growth. For the most part, Summer is a reliable narrator - meaning that she doesn't directly lie to or mislead the audience - but some of her motivations are clearly questionable. It is obvious to the reader that Summer dislikes Cletus because she fears he might steal Ob away from her, but Summer herself doesn't recognize the motivation for her deep dislike, which colors some of her narration as misleading, although not intentionally. Without insight into Summer's thoughts, the reader would likely be confused as to her motivations, particularly when dealing with her conflict about Cletus, and her emotions over missing May. Additionally, the story is told in present tense, which adds a sense of urgency to the story's action.

Setting

The first half of "Missing May" is set in Deep Water, a neighborhood in the heart of Fayette County. Summer and Ob live in a small trailer on the mountain in Deep Water, and at the opening of the novel, Summer likens that trailer to a small toy God had been playing with before accidentally dropping it from heaven: "Down and down and down it came and landed, thunk, on this mountain, sort of cockeyed and shaky and grateful to be all in one place" (Page 5). Although she says the trailer is all in one piece, that isn't counting the part in the back where the aluminum has peeled off, or the missing window, or the fact that the front steps are sinking. Despite its flaws, this trailer is the first real home Summer has ever known.

The second half of Missing May is set on the road, with Ob, Summer, and Cletus filing into the old Valiant and driving down to Putnam County. The first stop on the trip is the Underwood's home to ask Cletus' parents' permission for him to join them on the road trip. The Underwood home is described as a tiny cottage set back from the road in a clump of pine trees, resembling the cottage in the fairy tale "Goldilocks and the Three Bears". The story then progresses to the highway, and Charleston, the city's capital. All three of the main characters think the capital has the most gorgeous buildings they've ever seen, and are particularly enthralled with the capital coffee shop where they imagine the governor eats his lunch.



Language and Meaning

As the novel is written for young readers, the language tends to be very conversational and easy to follow, particularly as it is told from a twelve-year-old's point of view. The sentences are constructed in a way that is not only easy to follow, but also gains momentum as the reader reads on. The sentences are constructed to entice the reader to turn the next page, and often this structure works. Occasionally, there are passages utilizing religious words and phrases which may be a hindrance to some readers. Most readers should be able to deduce what these vocabulary words mean contextually, and this language, in fact, adds a depth to the novel that allows the reader a glimpse into a world that is made believable through the language used by not only the characters but by the narrator as well. Most of the novel is told through exposition, without a lot of dialogue, perhaps because there are only three characters in the novel - Summer, Ob and Cletus, and the relationship between the three is so filled with tension that a lot of dialogue would seem inauthentic.

Structure

This novel is very short, composed of twelve chapters ranging in length from two to ten pages. The chapters tend to be short and full of action, which propels the reader through the novel. The novel is also divided into two parts: "Still as Night" and "Set Free". These two sections reflect the emotion of the house in the wake of May's death. At first, the house is still as night, as if both Summer and Ob have died, emotionally, along with May. In the second section, both characters are emotionally able to let May go, thus setting themselves free to live their lives again.

The plot of the novel is relatively simple without subplots: the story revolves around Summer and Ob's emotional inability to let Aunt May go. For Ob, this journey involves traveling to Putnam County in the hopes of meeting with a medium who can still converse with May, and for Summer, this journey means protecting Ob from his own debilitating emotions, and from Cletus who threatens to steal him away from her. The plot is linear with the exception of a few flashbacks: in chapter two, when Summer remembers moving in with Ob and May for the first time, and in Chapter four, when Cletus recounts his near-death experience. Even though the majority of the conflict takes place in the characters' thoughts and emotions, the pace of the novel is quick as Rylant finds other ways of incorporating action into the story, even without the use of excessive dialogue. The novel is quite easy to read and the plot is engrossing once the reader is immersed in the story being painted in its pages.



Quotes

"I knew I must have been loved like that, even if I can't remember it. I must have; otherwise how could I even recognize love when I saw it that night between May and Ob?" (Page 4).

"May would tell Cletus and me, if she were here right now, that it's okay to grab for something or somebody that's being swept away from you. She'd tell us to hold on tight because we're all meant to be together. We're all meant to need each other" (Page 23).

"I felt more than ever cut apart from him, sent off on my own while he took off on his, while he made plans to set aside this life we both knew so purely to try to make it to another one he knew nothing about except that somewhere in it he might find May" (Page 30).

"Just like there are certain ways people expect you to get married, or go to church, or raise kids, there are certain ways people expect you to grieve" (Page 36).

"I got no 'gigs in me anymore. The only vision I've got is of my poor old May, and seems there's nobody nor nothing can distract me from that" (Page 50).

"Then I figure there'll be no use us returning to our home in Deep Water. Because we will have waded out too far, out past the point of no return, too far to ever make it home again" (Page 56).

"I had no reason to fear bats, and as I grew and discovered how many people are deathly afraid of them, it made me wonder about fear. Whether it all just starts with the people who raised us" (Page 58).

"It's funny, how you can know something like that right away. How you can see in someone's face that he feels completely safe, and full of power and love, and suddenly things between you become so easy" (Page 60).

"There was a feeling in that car, and it was almost sadness, but it wasn't. It was sweeter than sadness" (Page 68).

"We were trying to outwit Death on this trip, rise above it, penetrate the blockades it put up between us and May. We were coming to Putnam County to put Death in its place, and instead it had put us squarely back in ours" (Page 73).

"But what is it that makes a person want to stay here on this earth anyway, and go on suffering the most awful pain just for the sake of getting to stay? I used to think it was because people fear death. But now I think it is because people can't bear saying goodbye" (Page 79).



Topics for Discussion

At the opening of the book, what type of relationship does Summer have with Cletus? Why do you think she is so threatened by Cletus and desperate to keep him away from Ob? What changes in Summer's mind in regards to her views on Cletus? Do you think Summer and Cletus will be friends in the future? Why or why not?

What do you think the significance of the town name, Deep Water, is? What relationship did May have to water when she was alive? How might May's relationship with water have affected her relationship with her hometown, before and after her death?

Describe Cletus' experience with the afterlife. How did his experience with life and death affect his relationship with Ob's? How did this experience further separate Cletus from Summer?

Throughout the novel, there is a parallel drawn between Summer and Dorothy from "The Wizard of Oz". First, describe the parallel created between these two characters, and then discuss whether or not you believe the comparison is appropriate and effective. Why or why not?

What is significant about the quote, "Just like there are certain ways people expect you to get married, or go to church, or raise kids, there are certain ways people expect you to grieve" (Page 36). How does this relate to the three characters in the novel and the different ways they choose to grieve with May's death?

Discuss Summer's childhood fear of bats. Where did the fear first come from? How was the fear overcome? What does Summer's experience with bats teach the reading audience about fear in general?

Summer and Cletus come from very different family units. First, compare / contrast the family life in which both Summer and Cletus were raised. What is the same about their parents? What is different? What conclusion does Summer finally come to about Cletus after meeting his parents? What is her emotional response to that realization?

What is the significance of the owl Summer sees on their way back from Putnam County? Why do you think she has such an emotional reaction to the sighting? Do you think this is an appropriate image to end Summer's emotional journey on? Why or why not?